A CURIOUS KIND OF GOOD NEWS

February 26, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Scripture
Exodus 3:1-6
Luke 13:6-9

"...if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."
-Luke 13:9 (RSV)

There is, as always, both good news and bad news. The good news about healing is good only to the degree that you know something about sickness. The good news about freedom is good to the degree that you know something about bondage. Good news about heaven is good to the degree that you know something about hell. You might even say there is no such thing as good news unless there is also bad news. Or you might say that bad news, when it is honest, is good news.

There is within religion an inclination to emphasize either bad news or good news, to come down hard on guilt or grace, human culpability or human potential. You might say that Puritan religion with its grim distrust of human nature was bad news religion... And that Protestant-Evangelical hell-fire and brimstone jostling with the devil, hell and sin is an almost artful expression of the bad news. And you might say that the strange phenomenon of New Age Religion, emphasizing getting in touch with your feelings, celebrating your humanness, or the enormously popular variations on the theme of the Power of Postive Thinking, are expressions of the other side of the equation... Good News Religion.

My proposal this morning is that Biblical Religion is always a mixture of good news and bad news or good news which is honest about the bad news.

There is one verse in the Bible particularly that illustrates the point. I chuckle whenever I read it. It occurs early in Luke as we are introduced to John the Baptist. John was a real hell-fire and brimstone preacher. He said things like...

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Even now the axe is laid to the root of the tree; every tree therefore that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Then, warming to his task, he told them about the one who was to come after him and it wasn't very cheerful.

Referring to Jesus, John said, "His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor... the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." And then the sentence that makes me chuckle: "So, with many other exhortations, he preached 'good news' to them." [Luke 3: 7,9,17,18]

That's a curious kind of good news! I wonder when the hearers realized it was good - if ever? In any event there is a whole genre of recent good news/bad news humor.

"I have good news and bad news," a celestial messenger says to a startled man: "The good news is that you will have your reward in heaven. The bad news is that it begins today." The Bible is consistent. It brings bad news and good news together in a synthesis which is, we believe, God's truth about the human condition. Luke was right about John... the bad news is part of the good news.

The bad news, Biblically speaking, is that human beings are never quite as god as God made them to be. There seems to be a flaw, a loveable one, but a flaw nonetheless. At the same time, God holds human beings accountable for their behavior and the the welfare of the community, indeed the welfare of the whole creation. High expectations, accountability plus human failure equals bad news.

One time Jesus told about a vineyard and an unproductive fig tree. It is a particularly intriguing and wise story. It is also a New Testament version of a good news/bad news joke.

The owner of the vineyard comes looking for fruit on a particular tree. Everyone who heard that opening sentence knew Isaiah 5 where Israel is described as God's vineyard and God as the vineyard owner. The images were old and beloved and familiar to all.

"For three years," he says, "I've been looking for fruit and there is none. Cut it down!" Now what you and I don't know is that it takes a fig tree three years to mature and the Levitical law prohibits harvesting the fruit for the next three years. So if the master has been looking unsuccessfully for fruit for three years it means that this fig tree has been taking up space and using up nutrients in the soil without producing anything for nine years.

God owns the vineyard. If the vineyard is Israel, this particular tree must be the religious leaders of Israel: Pharisees, Scribes, Priests. So what comes next is actually a good news/bad news joke. The vinedresser interrupts: "Give it another year... Let me have an opportunity to work with it a bit, put some manure on it." The word manure was never used in polite company. It was as inappropriate in this conversation as it is in church. But Jesus used it, and the people listening were howling in laughter as the people always laugh when the powerful are brought down a few notches. The good news is that grace abounds. The tree gets yet another chance, another year to produce. The bad news is - we're going to have to be honest - that it's going to take some outside help, a little manure in fact.

It's a wonderful little story and it is a relevant story because, frankly, modern religion doesn't seem to know much about the bad news which makes the good news so good.

Religion, we think, with some justification, has been obsessive about human frailty and has added to the already heavy burden of guilt people carry around. Enlightened religion ought to celebrate human goodness instead of dredging up all that old business about The Fall, Original Sin and what the Calvinists used to call "total depravity."

The typical Presbyterian reaction to the claims of the General Confession, "We have done those things we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and there is no health in us" is ordinarily, "Who me?"

Under the influence of enlightened humanism the Christian church has been more and more embarrassed by its own ideas about the human condition with the result that the bad news is banished. The late Phyllis McGinley wrote wonderfully penetrating poems about our humanness. One series, a favorite of mine, is called Sonnets From The Suburbs. One of the sonnets is about the community church:

"The Rev. Dr. Harcourt, folk agree
nodding their heads in solid satisfaction
Is just the man for this community.
Tall, young, urbane, but capable of action,
He pleases when he serves. He marshals out
the younger crowd, lacks trace of clerical unction,
Cheers Kiwanis and the Eagle Scout
Is popular at every function

And in the pulpit eloquently speaks
On divine matters with both wit and clarity,
Art, Education, God, the Early Greeks,
Psychiatry, Saint Paul, true Christian clarity,
Vestry repairs that shortly must begin -
All things but Sin. He seldom mentions Sin.
["Sonnets from the Suburbs, Community Church,"
Times Three, p. 134, 135]

The historians tell us it was the First World War which failed so utterly to make the world safe for democracy; and the Second World War which called into question all the assumptions about humanity getting better and better. Whatever it was, a generation ago our best thinkers concluded that the bad news, the Christian Doctrine of sin and the accountability of human beings for their behavior, might be the most valuable insight we have.

Reinhold Niebuhr broke with the easy liberalism of the day and wrote the classic 20th century analysis of the human condition which still penetrates.

Niebuhr wrote that we are insecure: "We seek to overcome our insecurity by a will-to-power which overreaches the limits of human

resolving to love more. And if we know anything about ourselves it is that trying to love doesn't get the job done. We can't love more by trying harder. We need reinforcements. We need help from the outside; a little manure perhaps, or a little grace - or a good combination of both.

Without a sense of sin, individual accountability disappears and not long after it any sense that we matter as individuals. It doesn't take children long to conclude that indulgent parents aren't expressing love: that easy, anything goes, indulgence actually means, "You don't matter. What you do has no meaning." Psychologists know that some youthful misbehavior is actually a plea for someone to care enough to say "no." William Muehl, professor at Yale, put it eloquently: "The people to whom the Gospel is to speak today are not huddled fearfully in the shadow of ancient altars... They are, rather, wandering about aimlessly, troubled by the increasing suspicion that no one literally gives a damn about what they do." [All the Damned Angels, p. 35, 38]

Well, someone does give a damn. Someone cares very deeply. Someone cares enough to be disappointed when you and I are not as good as we could be. Someone cares enough about us to want us to be responsible. Someone holds us accountable - which is the bad news but it is also the good news.

We want to be taken seriously. None of us has time for trivia. For one reason or another we take time out of very busy lives to be together in worship and my sense is that here, above all else, among all the places that occupy our time, here we want to be taken seriously. We may go to the theater, concert hall, health club, for diversion, for lightness and delight, but here we are open to seriousness. Here we may even invite accountability. "We are insulted," says Fred Craddock, "to have 'grace poured like syrup' over our lives with no diagnoses, no recommendation for surgery, no regimen for recovery." [Preaching, p. 88]

The bad news which is also the good news, is that there is one who takes us very seriously, a God who loves us enough to hold us accountable. This God is no indulgent parent but a parent, who loves us so much that our failures are borne deeply within the very heart of God.

The bad news which is also the good news, is that God may visit our consciences; give us a few sleepless nights on occasion; may torment us with "those things we have left undone which we ought to have done, and those things we have done which we ought not to have done," not to weigh us down with more guilt, but to get our attention, to persuade us to be honest, so that we can be forgiven and remade."

God comes with love to do something none of us can do alone, namely overcome our sin and lead new and grace-filled lives of love. That's the issue finally. God takes us seriously. God loves us. God's love comes to us in a very costly sacrifice - the life of a beloved son. Lent journeys to the cross and there, beneath that cross, you and I become witnesses to what seems to be the worst possible news. Our central symbol seems to represent nothing so much as human sin and misunderstanding and cruelty - unless it represents divine love and grace and forgiveness. And it has been the experience of men and women for 2,000 years that beneath the cross

that transformation happens, the symbol of our sin becomes the means of forgiveness and new life.

The invitation of the Gospel is to be brave enough to look at ourselves in light of God's expectation and intent, not in order to make us feel guilty and inadequate, but precisely to expose us to God's healing and recreative love.

We do it weekly in the Prayer of Confession and I invite you to do it now: to look honestly at your life; to ask, with full confidence in God's forgiveness, for the resources of God's love and Amazing Grace.

Good News - Bad News, bad news that becomes, by grace, good news...

"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed."

Grant us courage, O God, to look honestly at ourselves, integrity to admit our failures and faith to rely utterly on that amazing grace you have given us in Jesus our Lord. Amen.